CHAPTER IX.

The Episode of the English Ambassador.

We are now ready for the extraordinary episode of Sir Mortimer Brett," Locke resumed. "I think you will find that the narrative grows more interesting."

"I trust so," I yawned.

"Sir Mortimer is a comparatively young man, I understand. But he has already had 15 years to his experience as a diplomatist. He has been trusted implicitly by the British foreign office. He has been nothing less than a dictator in Bulgarian affairs, so far as England is concerned. There have been repeated attempts to bribe him. But he has been strong enough to resist all pressure—whether it be exerted by the sultan or by Ferdinand. But after an unblemished record of 15 years this Bayard in politics has fallen a victim to a vulgar intrigue with a political adventuress.

"Countess Sarahoff is the adventuress— a woman of marvelous charm and beauty. It is said she is the friend of Prince Ferdinand; perhaps it is he who first incited her to entice Sir Mortimer from the path of rectitude. Certain it is that she has been successful in bringing Sir Mortimer supinely to his knees before her, if the gossip of the embassies is to be believed.

"Now I can give you the situation in a nutshell. If Sir Mortimer is recalled, it is all up with Macedonia so far as immediate help from Bulgaria is concerned. Sir Mortimer's successor as consul general will certainly be the present vice-consul, and he is known to be strongly adverse to the Macedonian cause. Our Jewish banker will refuse his loan to Ferdinand; Ferdinand will be unable and unwilling to subsidize an army; Macedonia's struggle will come to nothing for the present."

"This banker must have remarkable faith in Sir Mortimer," I suggested, "to think that he can influence the British foreign office when his reputation is already tottering."

"My dear Haddon, I have been letting you behind the scenes. Our banker friend in all probability has no inkling of Sir Mortimer's impending fall. There is nothing to damn a man politically because he is in love with a woman. It is true that there have been innuendoes in plenty of the papers. But who believes the papers?"

"And a king's messenger has already been sent to Sofia to demand Sir Mortimer's recall?" I asked, thoughtfully.

"So they say, and now I come to a really humorous phase of this episode of Sir Mortimer Brett. When the king's messenger arrives at Sofia he will be unable to deliver his dispatches; he will find that his bird has flown."

"What! Sir Mortimer has left his post, and with this woman?"

"Less than a week ago Sir Mortimer was seen with Countess Sarahoff here in Lucerne. He had left Sofia suddenly under the plea of sickness, whether real or assumed. And now he has disappeared again from here, and has left absolutely no trace of his whereabouts."

"So that when the king's messenger comes here he will still be unable to deliver his dispatches. As you say, it is an extraordinary state of affairs. I suppose that Sir Mortimer continues to be a properly credited ambassador until he receives those dispatches?"

"Undoubtedly."

"And in the meanwhile there is a hue and cry for him?"

"My dear fellow, I have told you repeatedly that you are behind the scenes. Ostensibly Sir Mortimer has gone to the mountains for his health. But the arrival here in Lucerne of the mother and daughter is significant."

"They come to rescue him from the influence of Countess Sarahoff of course. But if she has disappeared with Sir Mortimer—"

"I saw you flirting with her at the kursaal about an hour ago," said Locke, smiling at me grimly.

CHAPTER X.

The Death-Mask.

I had raised my glass carelessly to my lips. I placed it slowly on the table. I met Locke's steady gaze not merely in surprise, rather in complete conviction. That was precisely the kind of woman I had determined she must be. But I had no intention of discussing her with Locke. A plan was already seething in my brain—a plan infinitely more thrilling than rescuing a comrade in the battlefield or a traveler lost in the mountain-side. I intended to keep that plan to myself. In the meanwhile I must have further details of this escapade of the missing ambassador.

"We will speak of Countess Sarahoff presently," I said, returning his smile coolly. "But tell me, why should England adopt the slow and clumsy expedient of sending a king's messenger, as you call him, across Europe, instead of demanding the instant recall of the minister by cable? That is my first question, and my second is this: are you my dear Locke, in the secret councils of the British foreign office that you know so much of their plans?"

"A king's messenger," drawled Locke, "is supposed to have a brain between his shoulders and to exercise his discretion. The foreign office would wish to be quite sure that the scandal was not a clever ruse of a secret agent of Russia or Turkey. Even if the scandal exists, there might be mitigating circumstances."

"You wish me to infer that this king's messenger is given discretionary powers of delivering or withholding his dispatch? But how do you know that? That brings me to the second question."

"My dear chap, I can put two and two together, can't I? I can see a church door, as Benedict said, when I am standing in front of it."

"Oh, then, you are simply guessing," I cried, disgusted.

Locke spread the tips of his fingers together, and regarded me humorously. "You forget I am consul at Lucerne? I, sir, am a personage."

"Rubbish!" I exclaimed, brusquely. "American consuls are not as a rule deeply in the confidence of the ministers in Downing street."

Locke laughed, looked about him cautiously, then whispered:

"It's something of a secret, Haddon. Before I was consul at Lucerne I was a newspaper man. Yes; don't look shocked. I am not averse to eking out the magnificent income allowed me by the United States government by sending a budget of news occasionally to my old chief."

"I understand; you newspaper men are ubiquitous. Before the mysterious knowledge of the press I am silent."

"I need hardly say that what I have told you is strictly between ourselves."

"Of course."

"So far I have not breathed a word of this extraordinary story. I wish to make a grand coup. I am waiting for the finale of the story—the dramatic and perhaps tragic denouement. For the end is not yet."

So saying, Locke produced his pocketbook. From its voluminous folds he extracted an envelope. He held it toward me in silence. I took it curiously. It bore an unfamiliar stamp.

"It is the stamp in the corner I wish you to examine carefully. In ten years a collector will pay a pretty penny for this stamp. Already it is as rare as strawberries in January. It was issued less than a month ago to mark the anniversary of Ferdinand's succession to the throne. Yes, it is his likeness and that of his son you are looking at. But Ferdinand would pay half a million francs if he could buy up and destroy that issue of stamps. In Bulgaria that is a simple matter. His secret agents are on the lookout in every capital of Europe. But you see they are not wholly successful."

As Locke had suggested, I looked critically at this double stamp which had caused Ferdinand so much anxiety. Two heads were depicted. They were placed side by side, a man of middle age and a handsome boy. It appeared to me a rather ordinary sort of stamp.

"Hold it upside down," commanded Locke, impatiently. "Cover the left-hand corner with your hand, so. Now, do you see that a portion of the heads of the father and son makes an unmistakable death-mask? And the death-mask is that of Prince Ferdinand."

Looked at in this manner the ghastly portent was vividly suggested. The nostrils of the two heads together formed the eyes of the death-mask; the mustache of the father made the eyebrows; and the brow and the eyes of the boy prince formed the nose and mouth. And more horrible than the death-mask itself was a wound in the temple, from which flowed a streak of blood.

"This wound," I asked, shuddering, "is it merely a coincidence? The look of agony—the staring eyes—is that meant to be a menace, a threat of a violent death?"

"Can you doubt it?" demanded Locke, replacing the envelope carefully in his pocketbook. "That death-mask is regarded by a large portion of Ferdinand's dissatisfied subjects as a 'heavenly sign.' That little stamp, I venture to say, is a death-knell for Ferdinand—it introduces into Bulgarian politics an awful and solemn note."

"A 'heavenly sign?'" I asked, shuddering again. "But he still lives?"

"Yes; at present he is in Paris. I suppose he is safe there. But when he returns to his capital at Sofia—"

"And the woman—this Countess Sarahoff, is she one of the revolutionaries who regard that stamp as a 'heavenly sign?' You told me that she was supposed to be the friend of Prince Ferdinand."

"I did. But is she? She is a woman of mystery. Is she really in earnest in seeking to entrap Sir Mortimer into influencing England to stand behind Bulgaria in her invasion of Turkish Macedonia? Is she ignorant of the existence or at least the significance of this stamp? Or, posing as a friend of Ferdinand, having ready access to him at any hour, will hers be the dagger plunged into his breast at the fatal hour? Perhaps Sir Mortimer is not the guileless victim we think him to be. Perhaps the king's messenger does not have two sets of dispatches to be presented at his discretion. Perhaps this death-mask is a ghastly accident and not a menace. Perhaps Countess Sarahoff, alias Sophie de Varnier, is a lamb of innocence. Perhaps! But, my dear chap, don't trust that 'perhaps.'"

Locke rose and pulled on his gloves. I stared at him in sudden comprehension.

"I understand now. You had more than one object in coming to see me this morning," I said, soberly.

He lit a cigarette, looking down at me in deep thought.

"In America the game of politics is a fair game and above board. We show our cards; they are on the table for all the world to see. The very frankness of our methods puzzles the diplomats of Europe. Here in Europe things are managed differently. There are wheels within wheels. No pawn is too insignificant to be made use of. This pawn may be a simple citizen, even a tourist—"

I shook the hand he held toward me, and retained it, bewildered.

"But that is absurd on the face of it. In what possible way could I be of use to this Countess Sarahoff?"

Locke shrugged his shoulders carelessly, and blew a ring of smoke with precision at the chandelier.

"Nothing is quite absurd," he returned, calmly. "Two days ago I read of an unfortunate accident of a fellow-countryman and an old college acquaintance. To-day I am surprised to find this countryman of mine on excellent terms with a woman whom I have every reason to believe is a dangerous adventuress. I come to see my fellow-countryman, to offer him my sympathy. I remain to warn him."

"But why?" I demanded, still skeptical.

"There are three facts that should make you think, Haddon. First of all, you have made the acquaintance of the mother and the sister of Sir Mortimer Brett. Secondly, Countess Sarahoff has made your acquaintance. Thirdly—contradict me if I am wrong—she has already interested you; more than that, I venture to say that you have made an appointment with her."

He looked at me keenly. I was silent.

"These, my dear Haddon, are simple facts. Perhaps there is no relation between them. Again I say, 'perhaps.' But don't let the mysterious machinery of intrigue catch you in its meshes. Its wheels may crush you. You have had enough trouble, and look out for Countess Sarahoff."

"I shall try to remember your advice," I said, struggling to control my excitement, and placed his visiting-card in my pocket. "Yes; I shall see you again before I leave Lucerne."

"Oh, suit yourself about that," said Locke, coldly.

Not until afterwards did it occur to me that I had treated him rather cavalierly—indeed, laid myself open to suspicion by my silence.

CHAPTER XI.

Countess Sarahoff Gives an Invitation.

I stood quite still after Locke had left me, lost in thought.

A life for a life, Helena had said. But is not honor sometimes dearer than life itself? At least the honor of a loved brother.

That I could exert any influence

The Dinner at the Hotel Nationale.

over the mind and actions of a man as famous in affairs as Sir Mortimer Brett was absurd. Even had that been possible Helena would have been the last to intrust his honor in my hands. And yet, as Locke had said, what if I were a pawn in the game of Countess Sarahoff?

Then why not be an intelligent pawn, to be moved if you will, carelessly here and there in the game of intrigue, but to be moved with my eyes open?

"No pawn is too insignificent to be made use of;" those were Locke's words. He had believed that she would attempt to make use of me. Heaven grant it, I thought, with a thrill of hope. We should then see what we should see. Yes; I would look out for Countess Sarahoff. But scarcely in the manner Locke had suggested.

Early in the afternoon a message came from her, as I had felt confident it would. A cousin was with her; they were to leave Lucerne that evening, en route to a little village in the Bernese Alps, where she had taken a chateau for the summer. She would be charmed if I would dine with them in her apartment at the Hotel Nationale. And would I pardon the absurd hour of 6:30? I was to come in my morning clothes, since neither she nor her cousin expected to dress.

I accepted the invitation with alacrity. That meant privacy—a certain intimacy. A cousin was to be there, it was true. But the presence of the cousin was, of course, a sop carelessly thrown at Mrs. Grundy.

The cousin had not arrived when I presented myself that evening. I struggled against a sense of shame. I was accepting her hospitality, and I had come to spy on her. But I reassured myself with the conviction that it was to be a game of tit-for-tat.

The apartment de luxe into which I was ushered was dimly lighted, and the air was heavy with the perfume of flowers. In the center of the room the white damask and silver of a table set for dinner gleamed under the soft light of candles. In some vague way, this room, one of a hundred others in the hotel, had lost something of its stiff formalism. It had charm. Charm! That was the word that best described this mysterious woman. Well, I must steel myself against that charm.

She had been beautiful the evening before; this evening she was radiant. Her eyes burned with a fire that at once disconcerted and excited. She was the incarnation of what one calls the joy of living. Never for an instant was she still. Now it was to glance critically at the admirably set table; now to rearrange the flowers. Presently she moved to the window, and drew back the heavy brocade hanging, looking at me over her shoulder.

"Why does my cousin not come?" she demanded, petulantly. "At 11 to-night we go to Vitznau by the boat. Before the birds awake to-morrow we must be off—up, up, up the mountains to my chateau. It will break my heart if we are delayed."

"Your chateau has great attraction for you," I said, smiling.

She came toward me impulsively, her hands clasped.

"Oh, you would like my chateau, monsieur. It is strong and rugged; and so high that to see its towers through the branches of the pine trees, as you climb the hillside, it seems a dream, a fantasy. And below, very far below, there is the noisy little river that rushes around its base, and an adorable village that crouches close to it for protection. And within, there are great shadowy rooms with gleaming bare floors and tapestries. Oh, yes, and there is my beloved piano. When the thunder rolls terribly over the lonely mountains, and the storm beats against the curtained windows, and the fire of huge logs in the hearth does not reach the somber corners—oh, it is then that I live. I am inspired. In the night the passionate soul of Chopin speaks to me. And in the morning when the sun is shining again, and the little river is gay and turbulent, there are my flowers and my books and my poor. And there is peace. My castle is a Castle of Indolence, and it is a Castle of Happiness."

"That is the castle we are all looking for," I said wistfully.

She moved restlessly to the piano. She struck the opening chords of that prelude of Chopin which is at once a suggestion of a funeral march and a procession in a cathedral. I watched her, fascinated, though I had sworn I would not be fascinated by her.

She stopped abruptly in the midst of a phrase. Her white arms dropped to her lap. She looked over toward me. Then she leaned her elbows on the keys; she nodded to me, half in entreaty, half in command. I stood opposite her, leaning toward her, across the piano.

"But sometimes I am lonely in my chateau," she said in a low voice. "Come with Dr. Starva and myself. Be our guest, Mr. Haddon."

I started. A man! I had not counted on that. I had known this was to be an evening of surprises. I had schooled myself to meet them without wonder. But this invitation, so strangely and so unexpectedly given, completely astonished me. Who was this convenient cousin, this Dr. Starva?

The chance I had expected had come. To accept such an invitation as a matter of course, however, would be too absurd.

"You give invitations to all the world?" I asked ungraciously.

"No, monsieur, only to those who interest me, and who—"

"Are of use to you?" I asked indiscreetly.

She looked at me with cool, level eyes, still playing. "Absolument."

"And in what way do I happen to be of use to you, Madame de Varnier?"

She smiled mysteriously, shaking her head.

"That is a secret."

"I detests secrets," I said irritably.

"But if the secret were a condition?"

"Then I should probably refuse. I do not accept invitations when there are conditions attached to them."

"Then if I say that it is because I like you?"

"I should not believe you."

"Then perhaps I am sorry for you. You are unhappy. I will take you to my chateau to find happiness."

"Come, Madame de Varnier, let us stop fencing. Why did you speak to me last night? Why do you pretend to be interested in me—so interested that you ask me, an utter stranger, to visit your chateau? Do you remember my story of yesterday? Am I to think, do you wish me to think—"

She looked at me intently, very pale. Her lips were trembling, and yet she smiled—a smile mysterious, tragic, pitiful.

"Monsieur, I am not a jeune fille. I am a woman of the world. Fate has called to me. I must follow; I must meet my destiny; sometimes I must walk in the dark places. The world, your world, let it think what it will! Bah, it is not my concern what it thinks of me. Perhaps last night, this morning, I wished you to fall in love with me. Perhaps now I am asking you to give me a little respect, a very little, monsieur. But what does it matter?"

I looked at this strange woman in astonishment. It was a curious plea. Perhaps she had wished to make me fall in love with her! She made the frank confession with a childish naïveté. And in the same breath she asked for my respect!

"You speak in riddles," I exclaimed petulantly. "Tell me your purpose."

She looked up at me swiftly, half in defiance.

"Tell me yours."

"My purpose!" I cried. "I have none."

A moment she scanned my face keenly. Apparently she was satisfied that I spoke the truth. But that she should have even a glimmer of a suspicion was startling.

"Look, my friend, I speak no more in riddles, but very frankly. Come to my chateau because there you can do me a service, a great service. Voila, I have told you everything."

"Not quite everything," I replied quietly. "You have not told me, for instance, the nature of the service that you ask of the first stranger you meet."

"When you are my guest I shall tell you," she promised airly.

She plunged into a stormy mazurka to drown my protestations. I watched her, irritated and yet half yielding, as she played with the brilliancy and elan of a virtuoso. Then I walked to the window.

To reach it I passed a pier-glass paneled in the wall. A man's face was dimly reflected there. Though I did not look, I knew that he must be standing behind a door leading into another apartment. He had been listening, of course.

I did not betray my surprise. I stepped out on the balcony, looking down on the street below.

This incident banished my last shred of reluctance. These adventurers spied on me; it was equally fair that I play their game. Yes; I determined to meet them with their own weapons.

The music reached a stormy climax. There was silence. I did not go back into the room. I waited curiously. Would she again insist? If so, I determined to no longer refuse.

The heavy curtains at the window were parted. She stood beside me. Again I noticed the feverish light in her eyes; her bosom rose and fell tumultuously; her color came and went.

"Then you have no liking for an adventure?" she demanded in a spirit of desperate gayety. "Even when that adventure is to be shared with a woman—yes, a beautiful woman?"

"Not when adventures are thrust on me," I replied coldly. Her emotion repelled me.

"Ah, you persist in being ungracious. Then say this adventure brings happiness for yourself."

"I should require proof of that."

She saw that I was not to be won over by coquetry. She became serious, almost anxious. Instinctively I felt that she was about to play her last card. Had she known it, I was already decided. But she was ignorant of that, and risked everything to gain her purpose.

"You have set yourself a task. What if I can help you fulfill it?"

"Again you speak in riddles, madam."

"If I said I were listening last night!"

I frowned on her, furious, but I did not answer.

She felt no shame in making this confession. One hand rested on her hip, with the other she snapped finger and thumb.

"My dear monsieur, you are not attractive when you look like that. Even I have heard the English proverb, 'All is fair in love and in war.'"

"And since this is not love, you wish me to infer that it is war? And you ask the enemy deliberately into the camp?"

"It is neither love nor war. It is a truce. Does that satisfy you?"

"Until you tell me the service I am to do you, it must be an armed truce," I interposed cautiously.

I emphasized the adjective.

"Bien! At Alterhoffen you shall know all. Then it will be for you to decide if we are to be allies."

"Very well," I assented briskly. "I will go to your chateau with you. When do we start?"

Now that I had made my decision she grasped the railing of the balcony, exhausted. Presently I noticed that her lips were moving, and as I looked at her in wonder, I saw her furtively make the sign of the cross. When she spoke again, it was languidly, as with an effort.

"Dr. Starva and myself are to go to-night to Vitznau, a little town on Lake Lucerne, an hour's journey from here. To-morrow morning at the dawn we drive en diligence to Alterhoffen."

"Is it necessary that I go to Vitznau?"

"Yes," she said hesitatingly, averting her eyes. "The last boat leaves Lucerne at 11. Your luggage, can it be ready then?"

I nodded absently.

An immense man stood stiffly at the window awaiting us. His bearing was slovenly, as was his attire. The spectacles and the puffy face, unnaturally pale, suggested the habits of the student. But the eyes, small, crafty, and very bright, instantly corrected my first impression, and left me baffled and vaguely distrustful. It was the man whose reflection I had seen in the pier-glass.

"Ah, my cousin at last! Georges, this is Mr. Haddon, an American. He comes to the chateau at Alterhoffen as our guest."

It was impossible to doubt that he had spied on me with Madame de Varier's consent. But I was certain that he heard of my consent to go to Alterhoffen with positive annoyance. I was not blind to the significant look that passed between them: the eyes of Madame de Varier dilating in triumph and defiance; Dr. Starva equally defiant and sullen.

Evidently there was discord in the camp. Dr. Starva did not welcome the fly that had consented to walk into the web. Well, so much the better. A little discord might prove useful.

"Madam is an admirable host," Dr. Starva said slowly in French. "But if the guest is to be quite happy he must be content to amuse himself as madam wishes."

The words were almost a threat. I looked with repulsion at this pale, flabby, shuffling giant. It would be well to be on my guard against him. He might be dangerous. But half the battle was won in realizing that.

Madame de Varnier met his bold sally, insolently careless.

"A diner, messieurs," she cried gayly, and took my arm, leaving the huge Dr. Starva to follow.

CHAPTER XII.

Treachery.

Three hours later Dr. Starva and myself were on the little steamboat en route for Vitznau, a journey of an hour. I had met him at the quay; he was alone. Madame de Varnier, he coolly informed me, had taken an earlier boat. I was not to see her until next morning.

Frankly, I scarcely liked that. I could have wished for a more congenial companion. However, I was embarked on an adventure; and must take things as they came. It was to be a game of give and take. I was deliberately permitting myself to be their tool for the moment; I was to serve their purpose. My wages for the service were to be the opportunity of finding Sir Mortimer Brett. Until I had penetrated the mystery of his disappearance I would be as clay in their hands. Perhaps it might be necessary to be their partner for the nonce in their intrigues. They might wonder at my docility or guilelessness, but they should not question it. That was the delicate task I must bend myself to for the present.

We had seated ourselves well forward and were quite alone, for at this late hour the boat carried few passengers. The wind coming from the snow-clad peaks was piercing. I shivered, but rather from excitement than from the chilly air. Already the lights of Vitznau could be seen dimly through the thick mists.

Dr. Starva, rolling a huge cigar in the corner of his loose, sensual mouth, regarded me fixedly under shaggy eyebrows.

"It is cold. We must have some cognac." Without asking for my assent he summoned a waiter.

Even in so trivial a matter as the appropriateness of refreshments his tone was more a command than an invitation. The cognac would be welcome enough, but one less observing than myself might have noticed the alacrity with which he welcomed the excuse for the liquor.

"Do you know what it is to have a headache?" he asked, and, fumbling clumsily in his waistcoat pocket, he produced a tiny packet.

"No," I said, yawning, and watching him idly.

"Ah, you are fortunate. This little powder is a great benefactor to me. We are close to Vitznau. Through the trees there yau can get a glimpse of the hotel we are to stop at."

He pointed at a building a quarter of a mile distant from the landing stage we were fast approaching, holding in mid-air the packet of powder preparatory to placing it on his tongue.

I looked where he pointed; there was not much to see; the mist enveloped everything. The boy approached with the cognac.

My elbows on the table, I fingered carelessly the little glass placed in front of me, while that of Dr. Starva was being filled. As I tippped it toward me I caught a glimpse of a white powder in the bottom of my glass.

The Packet Was Lifted at His Lips.

Dr. Starva's headache powder!

Here was treachery indeed! But I did not move a muscle. I lifted my eyes slowly. Dr. Starva's great head was tipped back. The packet, empty of its powder, of course, was placed at his lips. But his rat-like eyes were watching me narrowly.

I had need to think and act quickly. The powder was a narcotic to deaden my senses. That must be prevented at any cost; and yet he must think that I had taken the drug.

He had called my attention to the hotel while he cleverly slipped the powder into the glass. I ought not to be less adroit.

As the waiter passed around the table his decanter in hand, I thrust out my leg and tripped him up neatly. He fell against Dr. Starva, the decanter still held carefully aloft.

In that moment of confusion I emptied the contents of my glass into my handkerchief. When Starva, furious and perhaps suspicious, pushed the man fiercely from him and looked at me, I was laughing heartily at his mishap, the handkerchief in one hand, the other holding out the glass for the brandy, the fingers closing over it to hide it from his view.

"Sante!" he cried boisterously, and drained the contents of his glass at a gulp. I followed his example, and in spite of the powerful liquor, I tasted (or fancied I tasted) the dregs of the bitter drug.

"Pah!" I cried in disgust, and was careful to hand the glass to the waiter instead of placing it on the table. "I have tasted better brandy than that in my life."

The expression of disgust promptly assured him that I had really drunk the potion given me. But now that I was supposed to have taken it, I wondered precisely what effect it should have on me, and how soon that effect should be felt.

Fortunately, he concerned himself with our luggage, for the boat was almost at the dock. When he returned to my side I greeted him in sleepy indifference. He looked at me keenly. I was not blind to his satisfaction. He shook my shoulder.

"What is it! Are we arrived?" I rose to my feet unsteadily.

"Yes, and it is necessary to hurry."

The handful of passengers had already left the boat. We descended the gangway slowly, Dr. Starva's arm grasping mine.

We entered the closed carriage that awaited us. I lurched clumsily into the vehicle, and sat crouched up in the corner, my head sunk on my breast. I assumed it safe and fitting that I should appear passably indifferent as to what passed now. Certainly by this time the drug would have taken some effect had I swallowed it. But I need not say that I had my wits with me.

My companion unfastened a valise he had brought into the carriage with him. I confess I watched him out of the corner of my eye in some trepidation.

I was thankful when he produced nothing more formidable than a military cloak and a felt hat. To my astonishment he deftly slipped from my shoulders the light covert coat I wore, and took my hat from my head, substituting the garments he had taken from his bag.

I could have laughed aloud, his confidence in my condition was so absolute, and his antics so extraordinary. When I left the carriage presently, surely the driver must see the change in my attire, and have his suspicions—unless he were in Dr. Starva's confidence!

And this fact did not escape me:

The hat did not ingulf me, as it must have done had it been Dr. Starva's.

Then if it were not his own—

In an instant I had guessed something of his game.

CHAPTER XIII.

I Masquerade Unwillingly.

It must have been after midnight when the carriage drew up under the porte-cochere of the hotel. Dr. Starva alighted and met the concierge at the vestibule. I heard little of what was said at first, but the surprise of the concierge was evident. He tossed his arms about, and burst into excited protests. Presently (and I could see that Starva was annoyed at the action) he came to the door of the carriage and peered within. I sat huddled up in the corner, apparently asleep.

"He is very ill—his Excellency!" cried the concierge in French.

"Listen to me," sternly replied Starva in the same language. "That is not his Excellency, imbecile. That is only a tourist, a Mr. Haddon. You understand," he repeatedly slowly, shaking the concierge by the lapel of his gorgeous coat, "that is only a tourist."

The fellow looked at Dr. Starva, bewildered.

"Mais, mais, mais—" he stammered in expostulation, pointing at me.

"Appearances are sometimes treacherous" said Starva grimly, and added with marked carelessness, "Is Madame de Varnier arrived?"

"An hour ago," muttered the man, his round eyes still staring at me.

"Then do you think, fool, that his Excellency would come to this hotel at midnight, and at the hour that she arrives? Are there no tongues to talk? Are there no eyes to pry? If Mr. Haddon"—he emphasized the name—"prefers to be nursed by a beautiful woman, shall I, his physician, refuse? But for his Excellency to be nursed by a beautiful woman—at least," he added meaningly, "for the world to know it—now do you understand?"

He towered over the little concierge, staring down at him fiercely vindictive. At the same time he slipped into the servant's unresisting hand a number of crisp notes. The hand of the concierge closed over them lovingly; his broad, good-humored face slowly expanded into a smile of perfect comprehension.

"But yes, I see it all as clearly as the nose on my face." The little wretch placed his forefinger on that organ and winked.

"Then you will see that there are no inquisitive servants to spy impertinently. Take us up on the lift yourself. The porter may leave the baggage below, since Mr. Haddon goes early to-morrow morning with his nurse and his physician. He must not be disturbed in his rest. To-night he is very ill, as you see. There is a long journey before us to-morrow. I shall arrange with you later concerning the diligence. Lastly, you will discreetly keep your eyes away. You will certainly not see his Excellency."

Dr. Starva now placed one foot on the carriage step, and leaning toward me, gently aroused me. I opened my eyes slowly and muttered something to the effect that we had arrived. Alighting, I grasped his arm mechanically, and we proceeded slowly into the hotel, across the hall, to the elevator. The little concierge trotted solemnly in front of us.

The elevator, as well as the hall and corridors, was deserted at this late hour. We met no one.

Arriving at the suite of rooms alloted to us the concierge was summarily dismissed. But before he left us the servant insisted on whispering to Dr. Starva these words, which no doubted startled him as much as they did me:

"The sister of his Excellency is in the hotel. Shall I tell her that—"

Dr. Starva clutched the shoulder of his informant, and held him in a fierce, vise-like grip.

"Thrice times stubborn fool!" he growled, "what concern is it to Mr. Haddon that the sister of Sir Mortimer Brett is at this hotel? Certainly you will not tell her."

He thrust his spectacled, pallid face close to that of the trembling servant. Then releasing him suddenly, he pushed him without, the little concierge rubbing his shoulder ruefully. Immediately he regretted this unnecessary violence. He stepped out into the corridor, and I guessed that he had smoothed the injured vanity of the gold-laced official with more of the crisp notes.

He had scarcely entered the room again before he admitted Madame de Varnier, and again the key was turned.

They lost no time in vain talk or congratulations on the success of their trick, whatever its meaning might be. Dr. Starva half led, half carried me into a bedroom adjoining. There I was put to bed with as little ceremony as a helpless infant is disposed of for the night. For a moment Starva looked down on me grimly. Then he disappeared, closing the door carefully behind him.

Now, indeed, I understood why Helena Brett and her mother had been so startled when first they had seen me—why Madame de Varnier had shown herself no less concerned—why I had caught Dr. Starva spying on me—why it was plotted that I should be drugged and brought hither in this melodramatic fashion.

In the world's history there have been many instances of men playing the pretender, but certainly none more innocent than myself. I should be dense indeed now did I fail to comprehend everything—from Madame de Varnier's first greeting, to the episode of the cloak and hat.

I recalled the woman's ghastly despair when she had read the telegram